Called to Proclaim

Luke 24:36-48

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If I asked you what you think the church should be proclaiming as the central message of Christianity, what would you say? Think about that a minute and then go ahead and write it in the chat or comment in Facebook.

Now because of limitations to both my vision and the size of the screen in front of me, I can’t see what you have written. But I can guess, and we’ll see if I’m right. I bet the word love appears in some form. Maybe hope. Maybe truth or justice.

And maybe some of you wrote what you heard today. According to Luke’s gospel, the risen Christ appears to his disciples with a blessing of peace and then tells them that they, as witnesses of his life and resurrection, are to proclaim ***to all nations*** “repentance and forgiveness of sins.”

Repentance and forgiveness of sins. That’s the main message.

Doesn’t mean that those other messages you may have written are wrong, for ultimately the disciples are to witness to all Jesus’ teachings (see the end of Matthew’s gospel), but the risen Christ here singles out repentance and forgiveness.

Repentance. Now there’s one of those churchy words you don’t here anywhere else. I doubt any parent, grandparent, or teacher listening says to a child, “now you repent of what you just did to your friend!” Or what spouse or partner says, “I repent of what I just did to hurt you.” So, let’s unpack that word a minute.

The scholar David Bentley Hart has done a magnificent translation of the New Testament which is meant to be more literal while also being readable in modern English. When the word “repentance” appears here in Luke’s gospel, Hart translates the Greek word as “transformation of the heart.” I love this on so many counts. Note it is not about behavior, but about the heart, which in this context stands for how we guide our lives and our behavior, what we believe at the deepest level that steers our conduct, our underlying worldview in which we wrap ourselves that determines how we speak and act.

Transformation of that is what Jesus’ whole life and mission was about. Go back to the Sermon on the Mount. He prefaced many of those teachings with the words, “you have heard it was said,” and then went on, “but I say to you.” Not only don’t kill, but don’t let anger rule your actions. Not only stay faithful in a relationship, but don’t look at other peoples’ bodies as though you can own them and do whatever you want to them. Transforming our moral center in such a way that we don’t only stay away from specific actions to a complete change in how we interact with other people on a heart/spirit/mind level. And that is much more challenging.

My friend Emily Heath says in their book *Glorify* that when we are moving with Christ, we “cannot help but be transformed by who he is. You cannot help but be changed. Sometimes that is going to be wonderful, and sometimes it is going to be staggeringly inconvenient and difficult,” but “it is always going to be life-giving.” (pp. 44-45) And I don’t care how old you are, or how young, that transformation in Jesus is not once and done; it is a lifelong process. If you are still alive, there is still transformation in the offing, if we allow our hearts to become more Christ-like day by day.

And that’s okay, because we do this transformation in the context of forgiveness, of God’s ridiculous, bodacious, extravagant grace, which is more than we can ask or imagine. This story in Luke starts with the risen, wounded Christ appearing to those who had denied knowing him and run away in fear, and his first words are “Peace be with you.” I can’t say that enough, because it gives me life in those days when I look at who I have been and know I, too, have run away from the heart Jesus is trying to shape in me. Transformation is only possible in the context of this love, what one hymn calls “the wideness of God’s mercy,” which I once saw written in a church bulletin with the wonderful typo, “the ***wildness*** of God’s mercy.” Which is also true.

But here’s the thing about this proclamation the disciples are called to make, the central proclamation at the heart of the church’s message. It’s not just about individual people. It’s not all about you or me. That’s such a critical thing to grasp as Christians: it’s not just about Jesus and me. As Emily Heath puts it, “Because we have been transformed by the grace of God, we become transformative people, seeking to gratefully change the world for the better.” (p. 99) So, this change, this word about transformation of heart and the wildness of God’s mercy is to go ***to the nations.***

Maybe it’s easier to imagine this message going just to our nation for starters. What in our nation’s heart needs transforming? What is it in our worldview, in our way of interacting with each other that needs a Jesus intervention? (pause)

Go ahead and feel free to write in chat or comments. My random thoughts include:

* Turning away from fear as the central attitude toward those who are different from us.
* Turning away from violence as the main method of conflict resolution or problem solving as civilians and as police.
* Turning away from the idolatry of guns.
* Turning towards those who are struggling in life, physically, spiritually, mentally, or economically.
* Turning toward love as the central motivation for actions both personal and political.
* Turning toward respect and honor of others in word, action and legislation.
* Turning toward our past, so full of racism and hate, so that we can turn toward truth and justice.
* Turning toward the common good and away from an idolizing of individualism that is only a mask for selfishness.

We could go on.

You heard me use the verb “turn,” because another common translation for “repentance” is “to turn around.” To do a 180. Not to be afraid to be honest about what isn’t working and start again, under the grace of God and the guidance of Jesus.

Last week I built an IKEA desk for my home office. Now if you have ever built IKEA furniture, you know how easy it is to mess it up if you don’t follow the directions, which are in pictures, not words. Well, I realized about a half hour into my process that I had made a mistake in the very first part of the work. I ranted and raved internally and tried to figure out a way to just continue without starting all over again to fix my error. I wanted to avoid the repentance, transformation, turning around part of the equation. What I really wanted was a Harry Potter wand!

But there was nothing for it but to turn around and go back, undo what was wrong, and do it right. My desk works just fine, now.

This is often what we need to do as individuals, and certainly as a nation, on so many fronts. It is hard work. It requires time and often a painful look at where we went wrong and the consequences of what was done. No one wants to do that. Without the model of Jesus and the surrounding wild grace of God, it would seem impossible. It’s not. That’s the message Jesus told his disciples needed to be their central word to the nations. It’s as critical now as it was then, and as unfinished.

The singer/songwriter Tracy Chapman has a song called “Change” with this chorus:

“How bad does it need to get?  
How many losses how much regret?  
What chain reaction  
What cause and effect  
Makes you turn around  
Makes you change  
Makes you change?” Well? Amen.